

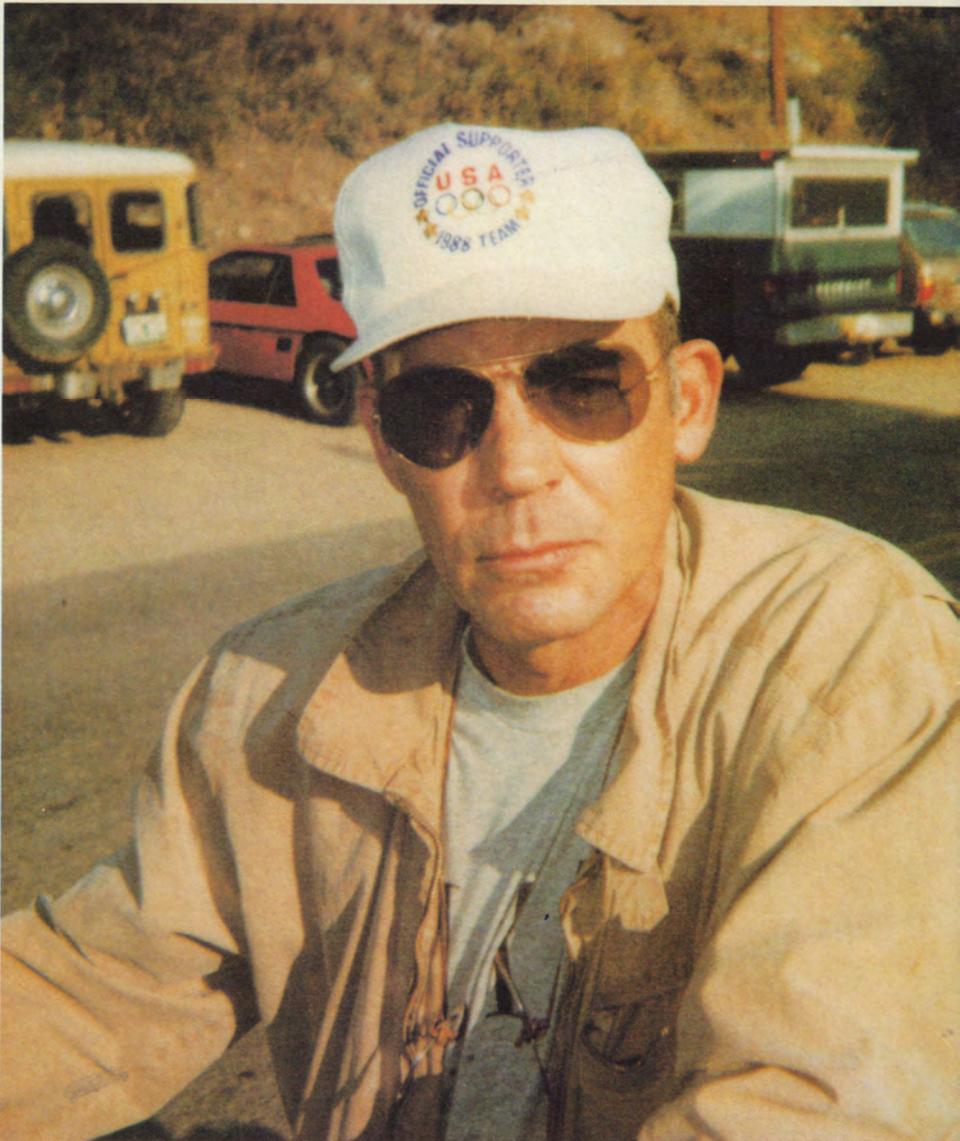
Best of BLITZ



**Ian Parker spent a few days
with the legendary
“Gonzo” journalist
Hunter S. Thompson**

BLITZ 71 Nov 88

**the
good
doctor**



thompson

"I should kill you rather than talk to you." Dr Hunter S Thompson has

a golf club in one hand, whisky in the other, and seems to mean business. My disfigured body will be airlifted home by a kindly, businesslike British consul. There will be a quiet funeral. Back in Colorado, Thompson will drive off into the night, firing guns at the moon and howling hideously. It seems likely. In the years of fame and fable since the publication of *Hell's Angels* in 1966, Hunter S Thompson has given only a reluctant handful of press interviews – the full Gonzo myth includes several sad tales of innocent, unwary journalists having their jeep tyres shot out by Thompson the enraged landowner. Attentive readers of his books will know where the Good Doctor lives (Owl Farm, Woody Creek, near Aspen, Colorado) and where he most frequently drinks (The Woody Creek Tavern in Woody Creek), but only a lunatic would visit unannounced. Signs on his front gate promise certain death for trespassers.

Best-selling author, hillbilly, marksman, wit, political columnist and giant myth of New Journalism, Thompson has constructed a rare and clever balance between privacy and familiarity. Thompson is a writer celebrated for putting his drugged and drunken self at centre stage, and for dispensing with the crude, fraudulent assumptions of the Objective View; yet he has studiously refused to become a public literary figure. You can buy the six books, read the cartoon-strip (Thompson inspired 'Duke' in Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury*), and even watch the movie (*Where The Buffalo Roam*), but Thompson is unlikely to return your calls.

He would rather kill you than talk to you, and the journey to Colorado takes three bumpy months. Thompson leads the hopeful interviewer in an amateur Gonzo dance of transatlantic pleas, threats and promises. Down in Kent, Thompson's friend and frequent collaborator Ralph Steadman suggests I "appeal to quiet reason". He recommends Aspen as "a real neat place, as they say", but adds, ominously, "I don't envy you."

Ellie Hobson, Thompson's 22-year-old assistant, friend, shopper, cook and press agent, I continue the effort. He says he won't. He says he will. Finally, unaccountably, Thompson says he will.

Aspen is a town auditioning for a Cinzano ad, a pristine two- and three-storey grid reached by an empty twin-engined de Havilland which crawls over the Rockies from Denver. It does not seem natural Hunter country. There are no old people or children. No one is disabled or drunk or ugly. There is no litter. The policewomen strut in mirror shades and hotpants, and the jeeps cruise quietly at 20mph. Aspen is a skiing village – the skiing village – in winter, and a hot, fresh-air resort in summer. Aspen is Jack Nicholson's second or third or fourth home. For the tanned co-eds, the baby-boomers and skinny starlets, "Have a nice day" is less a parting platitude and more a safe prediction. In the bank, on the teller's counter, is a little plastic pot of dimes. IF I DON'T CALL YOU BY NAME, PLEASE TAKE ONE, says the sign.

"Hello Julie," I say.

"Hi, er..." says Julie.

Bingo!

In 1972, *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas*, Hunter S Thompson's outrageous saga of drug-crazed journalistic endeavour, changed the course of modern writing. Thompson's latest book, *Generation Of Swine*, is a collection of his columns for the *San Francisco Examiner*, and is published next month. Two extracts from the book appear on the following pages and, in a rare interview at his mountain home in Colorado, the godfather of Gonzo talks to BLITZ about guns, drugs, crime and politics. INTERVIEW IAN PARKER

Thompson keeps his distance, ten miles up the valley. I leave a message and wait by the hotel pool. The reply eventually comes: "Dr Hunter S Thompson will meet you in the Woody Creek Tavern – after the game." The game? I'll be exposed, I know, as a football virgin. I'll be derided and chased out of town. I trudge out of the heat to a TV and watch the Denver Broncos – Thompson's boys – suffer a messy and violent defeat against underdogs The Seattle Seahawks. Now I'm *really* nervous.

The Woody Creek Tavern is a real enough place but, like Jeffrey Bernard's Coach and Horses, it is so frequently called upon as a beery dramatised backdrop that it has acquired a strange kind of honorary fictionality. For the Thompson reader, it's an odd experience. Imagine, in a strange cold town, if you pushed open a heavy wooden door, walked down three steps and found yourself – *what?* – in Cheers. Yo, Norm! Hi, Sam!

As the money has washed in and around Aspen during the Seventies and Eighties, Woody Creek and its tavern have clung on to a certain roughneck credibility. But at the bar, amongst the hard-drinking check-shirted Dukes Of Hazard, there are sightseers and touring cyclists, eager young rosy people, cameras cocked in readiness for the picturesque brawl which they hope will break out over the pool table.

After two beers, I feel a hand on my shoulder. I jump.

"Er... Ian?"

Thompson is tall and drunk. He has brought his cocktail from the car. He is wearing shorts, socks past his calves, and an Aspen Police baseball hat. One hand is bandaged. "I stopped going real fast. Hit a ditch. Bang. It was about a 70-mile-an-hour halt." As if not to disappoint, Thompson presents himself in full Gonzo splendour. He walks with a strange, dangerous-looking lurch. His voice is an odd staccato slur. His sentences accelerate up to a final, emphasised word. The golf club

thompson

comes later. He is not going to kill me yet. He seems relaxed. He is weird, but not mad; unnerving, but not yet scary. He behaves as one might expect of a brilliant drunken notorious coke-fiend, aged 51.

"How are you, Hunter?" asks the waitress.

"Er, drunk."

"Yeah? It's better than being sober."

"Oh yeah."

This, I'm told, is not the time for an interview. Ellie Hobson is with him, and we just have some drinks. After half an hour or so he asks, "Are you sober?"

I think before replying, hoping not to offend. "Yes."

This is good, because Thompson has a task...

"I heard... [clink, gulp] er... you came from a long family of... er... gardeners."

Thompson, who has been badly misinformed, wants me to mow his lawn. Drink in hand, he leads me to his aged Volvo. I've read about the driving, so I brace myself. The car careers up the valley at 90 mph. Foot down, Thompson steers with his bandaged hand and drinks with the other, swerving from left to right on the empty road. We screech into the drive of his isolated wooden home sat in 127 acres of hugely precious real estate. Hobson pulls up five minutes later.

Thompson promises me that if I tape or photograph unannounced,

he will shoot me. So I wait. As it gets dark, I mow the grass around the house. Thompson arranges the front porch. The barbecue has to be lit, the pet peacocks have to be fed, and the fabled sound system — one of the most powerful in the state — is cranked up to full volume. On a low table are whisky, beer, ice, Dunhill International and drugs. By the time I have permission for my Sony, we are talking about *Blue Velvet*.

"If they ever make another film," says Hobson, "Hunter [pronounced Hunner] wants Dennis Hopper to play him."

Thompson nods and drinks.

Is it true about a film of *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas*?

"Yeah," mumbles Thompson. "There are some difficulties, apparently, because of, hah, the drug content."

Hmm. If you remove that...

"Yeah! But they don't have to take it out. I said I'd cure the script for them. The script doctor. I figured the whole thing. The drugs could be left in. You just have to change the ending. I don't think there *was* an ending to the book. I just had to finish it when we were going to press. So I just threw in that little airport thing in there. It means nothing.

"I thought of the perfect ending, which would take care of all the objections about drugs... We'd fail to get him on the plane, and in a frenzy of, er, Hunter craziness — hah — we would race down the runway and, in an accident, *collide* with the jet, and explode — *explode*, hah! — and that would be the end, you know... And everybody would get their just desserts. All the dope fiends would be punished, along with a lot of innocent people. It would be an anti-drug film in a way. Yeah? Is that the right ending?"

"Or you could have a ten-years-later," suggests Hobson. "Dr Thompson as head of the George Bush administration's fight against drugs."

"That's right! Yeah. *Forced* to take over the world... You believe in elitism? I do, in almost every area... I'm perfectly right in believing that I should

And I will give him the morning star.

That is from Revelation — once again. I have stolen more quotes and thoughts and purely elegant little starbursts of *writing* from the Book of Revelation than anything else in the English language — and it is not because I am a biblical scholar, or because of any religious faith, but because I love the wild power of the language and the purity of the madness that governs it and makes it music.

And there is also the fact that I spend a lot of my time on the road, renting typewriters and hustling Fax machines in strange hotels and always too far from my own massive library at home to get my hands on the wisdom that I suddenly realise — on some sweaty night in Miami or a cold Thanksgiving Day in Minneapolis — I need and want, but that with a deadline just four or five hours away is utterly beyond my reach.

You cannot call the desk at the Mark Hopkins or the Las Vegas Hilton or the Arizona Biltmore and have the bell captain bring up the collected works of Sam Coleridge or Stephen Crane at three o'clock in the morning... In some towns, Maria has managed to conjure up a volume of H.L. Mencken or Mark Twain, and every once in a while McCumber would pull a rabbit like Nathaniel West's *Cool Million* out of his hat or his own strange collection in his office at the Examiner...

But not often. Fast and total recall of things like page 101 from *Snowblind* or Marlowe's final judgment on Lord Jim, or what Richard Nixon said to Henry Kissinger when they were both on their knees in front of Abe Lincoln's portrait in the White House on some crazed Thursday night in July of 1974 are just about impossible to locate after midnight on the road, or even at noon.

It simply takes too much time, and if they've been sending bottles of Chivas up to your room

for the past three days, they get nervous when you start demanding things they've never heard of.

That is when I start bouncing around the room and ripping drawers out of the nightstands and bed-boxes and those flimsy little desks with bent green blotters that they provide for traveling salesmen — looking for a Gideon Bible, which I know will be there *somewhere*, and with any luck at all it will be a King James Version, and the Book of Revelation will be intact at the end.

If there is a God, I want to thank Him for the Gideons — whoever they are. I have dealt with some of His other messengers and found them utterly useless. But not the Gideons. They have saved me many times, when nobody else could do anything but mutter about calling Security on me unless I turned out my lights and went to sleep like all the others...

I have spent half my life trying to get away from journalism, but I am still mired in it — a low trade and a habit worse than heroin, a strange seedy world full of misfits and drunkards and failures. A group photo of the top ten journalists in America on any given day would be a monument to human ugliness. It is not a trade that attracts a lot of *slick* people; none of the Calvin Klein crowd or international jet set types. The sun will set in a blazing red sky to the east of Casablanca before a journalist appears on the cover of *People* magazine.

It is always bad business to try to explain yourself on paper — at least not all at once — but when you work as a journalist and sign your name in black ink on white paper above everything you write, that is the business

you're in, good or bad. Buy the ticket, take the ride. I have said that before and I have found, to my horror, that it's true. It is one of those half-bright axioms that can haunt you for the rest of your life — like the famous line Joe Louis uttered on the eve of his fight with Billy Conn: "He can run, but he can't hide."

That is a thing you want to remember if you work in either journalism or politics — or *both*, like I do — and there is no way to duck it. You will be flogged for being right and flogged for being wrong, and it hurts both ways — but it doesn't hurt as much when you're right.

There are times, however — and this is one of them — when even being right feels wrong. What do you say, for instance, about a generation that has been taught that *rain is poison* and *sex is death*? If making love might be fatal and if a cool spring rain on any summer afternoon can turn a crystal blue lake into a puddle of black poison scum right in front of your eyes, there is not much left except TV and relentless masturbation.

It's a strange world. Some people get rich and others eat shit and die. A fat man will feel his heart burst and call it beautiful. Who knows? If there is, in fact, a Heaven and a Hell, all we know for sure is that Hell will be a viciously overcrowded version of Phoenix — a clean well-lit place full of sunshine and bromides and fast cars where almost everybody seems vaguely happy, except for the ones who know in their hearts what is missing... And being driven slowly and quietly into the kind of terminal craziness that comes with finally understanding that the one thing you want is not there. Missing. Back-ordered. No tengo.

Vaya con Dios. Grow up! Small is better. Take what you can get...

Heaven is a bit harder to figure — and there are some things that not even a smart boy can tell you for sure... But I can guess. Or wonder. Or maybe just think like a gambler or a fool or some kind of atavistic rock & roll lunatic, and make it about 8—1 that Heaven will be a place where the swine will be sorted out at the gate and sent off like rats, with huge welts and lumps and puncture wounds all over their bodies — down the long black chute where ugliness rolls over you every ten or sixteen minutes like waves of boiling asphalt and poison scum, followed by sergeants and lawyers and crooked cops waving rule books; and where nobody laughs and everybody lies and the days drag by like dead animals and the nights are full of whores and junkies dawdling at your windows and tax men jamming writs under your door and the screams of the doomed coming up through the air shaft along with white cockroaches and red stringworms full of AIDS and bursts of foul gas with no sunrise and the morning streets full of preachers begging for money and fondling themselves with gangs of fat young boys trailing after them...

But we were talking about Heaven... Or trying to... But somehow we got back into Hell.

Maybe there is no Heaven. Or maybe this is all pure gibberish — a product of the demented imagination of a lazy drunken hillbilly with a heart full of hate who has found out a way to live out there where the *real* winds blow — to sleep late, have fun, get wild, drink whiskey and drive fast on empty streets with nothing in mind except falling in love and not getting arrested...

Res Ipsa Loquitur. Let the good times roll. ●

HST
Paradise Valley

©Hunter Thompson 1988. From *Generation of Swine*

have all these guns that I do. This is a shooting gallery up here. I've become a precise shooter. I'm a good instructor. With some money, I could teach you to be a real good shot."

How many guns have you got?

"Oh, lots... I'll show you."

Thompson wanders inside and comes back with a Luger, a .44 Magnum, and something slim and mean with a telescopic sight. He invites me to look through the scope. I point it at the bright blue incinerator which is attracting and killing flying insects. They flare up and fry, and drop to the ground, providing easy fresh meat, explains Thompson, for the treasured peacocks.

What's interesting about guns?

"It's the same as motorcycles... They work! There's a whole different world between these things – these are works of art – hah – and the cheap Saturday night specials. That's where the elitism comes in, you know. If I got guns like those, then I should be in prison, because those guns are made for nothing but street warfare. They're the handguns that kids use, and crack dealers and people like that. Fifty dollar pieces of shit. But there are very few things you can deal with that are as finely made as these things. I figured out, while teaching people to shoot, that if you have the right tools, there are only two more things. One is you have to point the gun. And when it's pointed, when you see something in that scope, then you pull the trigger. So if you point it at my head, and pull the trigger, you will hit it. That's a rare testimony to tools, toys, machinery and anything else."

Like an plane taking off...

"Oh yeah, goddamn! Oh. You have *no* idea what a big jet is like when you're sitting at the back. You have to go to the front. They fly at about half speed and about half power normally, but they can really fucking go. Hah! I was in one on a campaign flight. I like to go in the cockpit. It's all full of beautiful lights, and gauges and shit, and you can see out in front. Right back where we are, it's like riding in a limousine with the windows blacked up, so you don't really have any sense of driving. But, goddamn, you get in the front..."

"I was behind the pilot when we were going over San Diego, and it was a bad night, you know... and I was goading the pilot, the engineer, and he says, 'You like fast motorcycles?', or something like that, 'Goddammit, let's have some fun, let me show you what this thing will do.' And he stood the sonofabitch on its tail – a 747 – and we went straight up, for I don't know how long... and I was standing behind the pilot, with a big drink of Jack Daniels in my hand, and it was pretty full, I – hah – remember clearly. I thought it would spill with any movement, but when he started up, the drink came back like this, I was put against the wall, with about three or four Gs, you know, something horrible, with the eyeballs... and the drink, I didn't have to hold it! It never spilled a drop. It was pressed into my chest with tremendous force. It was wild... really. They play with them, but they don't do it with people on board."

"It's very unlikely that a person, any one person, could be universally seen as the craziest person in the world, and still be considered to be a wise man of politics – a seer of some kind."

But they're powerful. Like motorcycles."

Thompson's house pays full tribute to modern technology. His 30-odd-inch colour TV is linked to several VCRs and a satellite dish. He has a fax, a photocopier, a microwave, several telephone lines, as well as a tractor, the sound system, and the cars.

Is there any machinery that you want and haven't got? Besides a plane.

"That's a good question. I see we're going to have some fun. Goddamn! Well, I know there is. I have great faith that out there are endless toys and good things. Well, I found the other day by accident, that there was in fact a more powerful, a hugely more powerful handgun – hah – even more powerful than a .44 Magnum, which I am a master of and, ye gods, to find out that there was a .454 Magnum even more powerful and more accurate, perfect handling, custom made... I had to have it, of course. Hah. So it's coming too."

You've ordered it?

"Yeah. It's there. It's over in Denver. I just have to get it. I should have asked you to... well..."

I don't think...



"Well. It is the most powerful handgun in the world. And the .44 Magnum is very scary."

What does it do that another gun doesn't?

"Let me show you."

It's dark and late in the middle of nowhere. A poster in the window reads EXPERTS AGREE. ED MEESE IS A PIG. I'm jet-lagged and a little drunk. And the most dangerous man in journalism wants to start firing guns. He wants *me* to start firing guns.

"Here, put your hand where it feels comfortable. You're going to pull this back. Count to three. I'll try to get a picture."

Like this?

"Yeah."

Here?

"Yeah."

I put my finger on the trigger, and point the gun into the sky.

One, two...

In predictably novelistic fashion, I can see a very clear image of myself, as if from ten feet up. I'm holding the second most powerful handgun in the world, hands held together and arms outstretched. Goddamn! ...three.

Immediately after the flash, the gun jerks almost vertically, and my arms are forced back towards me. An echo runs around the valley. Gradually, I regain my hearing.

"...the neighbours," Thompson is explaining, "still haven't got used to the sound of the full autos, the machine guns. These are just booms and bangs. The full auto is a hideous sound. It makes them nervous."

For a while, more guns are fired and – pathetic, drunken hope – we try, in turn, to take photographs of a bullet leaving the barrel.

Have you ever seen anyone being shot?

"Yeah, but that's a whole different game to having a gun. Hard to explain. I don't even think of guns as weapons... I remember when I was in Brazil, I got into a terrible fight in the street. We went hunting for a jaguar, a big wild jaguar. It would come down and eat out of the garbage behind this restaurant on the Copacabana Beach, and for some insane reason – I thought, yes, I'll slay that animal. So we went out one night... and I had a pistol in my pocket, to shoot the jaguar and, you know, rid the neighbourhood of this terrible menace, and get myself a huge reward – all crazy shit. But we got in this fight, people were torturing a dog, these Brazilians... Here we were looking to kill a jaguar, and we get into a fight protecting a stray dog. We got into a big fight with a lot of people... I had a loaded pistol in my pocket the whole time, and the fight went on a long time... we had quite a lot of provocation, but it never occurred to me to use the pistol – in this horrible scene – angry and nuts and all those things.

"I understand how these things are deadly. They're a pretty precise

thompson

deadly weapon. The situation has never come about, where I've had to shoot anybody... It's easy to do."

But you've pointed it at people?

"Yeah."

Up here?

"Occasionally, yeah. Then you have to be prepared. They have to know,



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too, that you will shoot them. Yeah, it's an understanding. If you don't understand that, then you're in trouble. But up here it's a violent kind of life. I don't get many, hah, visitors."

Are you surprised you're alive?

"Yeah. Yeah. Well... I planned to die at the age of twenty-seven. I planned my whole life to that end. Which pretty well precluded any necessity to work, you know, or save, or be successful. Twenty-seven's a pretty good age to get out."

That's my age.

"Hah. Sorry." Thompson leans over and pats me sympathetically on the knee. "Well, yeah, you don't have to explain anything. At thirty, you've got to account for yourself somehow. I never thought I'd live this long. But when it became apparent that I might have to, when twenty-seven came and went, I had to do something, you have to explain yourself. Er... that's how I became a book rurgghh."

A what? The whisky slur is difficult.

"A writer – an author, author, yes. I was a journalist. The Hell's Angels thing. I'd quit journalism once again. I couldn't even get a job driving a cab in San Francisco. Out of desperation I turned back to journalism, just to pay the rent. And hit a golden vein. I had six book offers within two weeks... I wrote the article first for *The Nation*, and then, whacko, it hit a weird nerve, I didn't even have a telephone to call the publishers back. It'd been taken away."

Pity the Thompson biographer. The facts are bare, and he chooses not to elaborate. He was born in Louisville, Kentucky. He had a childhood, he has always claimed, of cheerful petty crime. While in the airforce in Florida he became Sports Editor of the base newspaper (sport remains the primary interest of his now idle alter-ego Raoul Duke, whose name, like Thompson's, is still to be found on the *Rolling Stone* masthead). Discharged from the airforce in 1957, Thompson found work on papers in Pennsylvania, New York and Puerto Rico, and at *Time*. At some point he was a student at Columbia University in New York City. At some other time, he was a professional photographer.

Thompson's first real journalistic success came as a reporter in the Caribbean and South America in the early Sixties, filing vivid stories of smuggling and Peruvian politics for the *National Observer* and the *New York Herald Tribune*. Once back in the US, a disagreement with

his *National Observer* editors over the Berkeley Free Speech Movement had him once again out of journalism. Based in San Francisco with his wife Sandy (now separated), he finished a novel entitled *The Rum Diary* (yet to be published), and became involved in a porn cinema on O'Farrell Street. He still carries a business card which has him as 'Night Manager' of the Mitchell Brothers Theatre Circuit.

In 1965, Thompson started his lengthy researches into the Hell's Angels. The story became a book in 1966. He had hit the golden vein, but his full, wild, participatory style matured only in the next few years. It is detectable in a piece on Jean-Claude Killy, in March 1970, and utterly unmissable in 'The Kentucky Derby Is Depraved And Decadent', written for *Scanlan's Monthly* two months later and illustrated by Ralph Steadman.

Before the end of the Sixties, now "an ordained doctor of divinity in the Church of the New Truth" (he uses the title freely), he moved to Colorado, and in 1970 ran for sheriff of Aspen on a Freak Power ticket. Thompson won in three precincts, broke even in a fourth, but was "stomped brutally" in the real estate powerbase. He wrote up the experience for *Rolling Stone*, where he remained a frequent contributor for ten years. In 1972, Thompson published *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas: A Savage Journey To The Heart Of The American Dream*. It wrapped up the Sixties, and changed the course of English prose.

The only journalist who could be found in the Watergate complex at the time of the break-in (he was drinking), Thompson covered the 1972 Presidential campaign as *Rolling Stone's* 'Home Affairs Correspondent'. His subsequent writings were collected in *Fear And Loathing On the Campaign Trail '72*, which established Thompson as an expert political reporter – not content to cover the smooth, TV surface of Presidential campaigning, but alighting instead on the dark, mysterious, ugly underbelly peopled by press agents, speech writers and image-makers.

The late Seventies saw little new Thompson. He took his legend onto the college lecture tour circuit and, in 1979, published *The Great Shark Hunt* (dedicated to Richard Nixon), which reprinted work from twenty-five years. It was followed by the most recent Thompson/Steadman collaboration, *The Curse Of Lono*, in 1983. *Generation Of Swine*, pieces taken from his abrasive and mainly political two-year-old column for the *San Francisco Examiner*, was published in the US this summer and appears here this month. In early September, it was Number Three in the *New York Times* non-fiction bestseller list, jostling for position with Donald Trump.

Late into the night, the important telephone, the hotline, rings. It's Will Hearst (some relation), Thompson's San Francisco editor, and he's expecting a column. Thompson curses and drinks, snorts more furiously and promises faxed copy within two hours. Gonzo, Thompson has always maintained, was born out of deadline fever: "Yeah," he says, "you're watching it..." Thompson, drinking faster, snorting faster ("This isn't for fur!"), puts us to work. "Two hours," he says, "can decide a whole career in journalism... Can you type fast?" Not fast enough, so Hobson sits at the typewriter in the kitchen. The room is a 3D scrapbook – every inch of wallspace is covered with letters, contracts and cuttings. There's a polaroid of Ralph Steadman's stately home, an old hand-out which

"This is a shooting gallery up here... The neighbours still haven't got used to the sound of the full autos, the machine guns. The full auto is a hideous sound."

invites the punter to "Gamble Naked In Las Vegas", and a catalogue offering weapons for sport and "revenge". Thompson tunes into CNN, and paces behind Hobson. "Hang around," he growls at me. "Pay attention. I can bounce ideas off you..." He dictates to Hobson, perhaps a sentence every five minutes: "'George Bush... er... wouldn't know the difference between, er... Robert Frost and...' er, what's that hamburger... er..."

Ronald McDonald?

"Yeah, hah! 'Robert Frost and Ronald McDonald'"

When Thompson gets hungry he hands me packets of frozen reconstituted chicken and shows me the microwave. I make nasty soggy breakfast for the three of us. Thompson drinks and dictates, passes around finished pages for comment, and San Francisco keeps ringing. ▶

thompson

▶ Thompson knows all the tricks of deadline avoidance. He faxes a single page and, when the Examiner asks for more, he feigns surprise that the machine has failed to transmit another six. "The idea is to send him something that looks like it's going to keep going."

The smoking and cursing and drinking and snorting and cooking is to no avail. The column refuses to take shape. It loses direction. Finally, with dawn just visible, Thompson gives up. He calls San Francisco to explain. Twenty-four hours later, the Aspen Daily Times, one of countless papers which take the syndication, runs a year-old Thompson column, and above it, the ancient, familiar phrase: "Dr Hunter S Thompson is on assignment!"

Thirty-six hours later, we meet for lunch in the Woody Creek Tavern. Friends and neighbours stop at the table and trade tales of machinery, football and troublesome children. Thompson, who lives alone, is in his element. "This is my dining room!" he explains, playfully hurling sliced tomato at the next table.

Thompson is a social journalist. His political writing derives from late-night drinking with good trusted contacts. "All I do," he has said, "is wander around and make bets with people." This morning, my tape machine represents the unacceptable face of journalism. "Shit," he spits, "I hate to talk to fucking people. I like to maybe drink with them... You're trying to *steal* my persona."

In the course of the meal, Thompson falls into a vicious, but seemingly well-rehearsed rage. Telling the truth, he is explaining, is easy. "... You act like a grasshopper, never worry about where you are, or what you

have to say, jumping from place to place ..."

And when you *do* lie – when non-fiction edges towards fiction?

Thompson leans across the table, snarling, and shouts into my face: "What d'you mean, you scum-ridden bastard? What kind of shitty insult is that ... You're about to get your head eaten ..."

Thompson's prose is, say, dramatised fact. Life is funnier and faster. And to visitors – to me – he presents what seems like a dramatised version of himself. When he bangs his broken hand onto the table, he lets out huge theatrical whoops of pain. Guns, drugs, whisky, fast cars, violent threats – this may be the real Thompson, but it also serves to prove that life *can* be loud and weird and dangerous. It goes halfway to destroying any fiction/non-fiction distinction. The big story to bring out of Colorado would be THOMPSON HAS RETIRED; you'd have him sipping camomile tea, listening to Mozart and composing verse for the inside of birthday cards. This is not the case. But it's hard to tell where the theatre stops and Thompson starts.

Between *Hell's Angels* and *Fear And Loathing*, what changed? You or the times?

"I was just the same, only more vicious. And the times – I never had time to notice them changing... No, I didn't change, and if the times did, that didn't matter much either. When did *you* see the change?"

The Kentucky Derby piece, in 1970? You've said as much yourself.

"Yeah... Yes, that's when I abandoned all hope, and laid down in a bathtub on Sunday morning in a New York hotel alone. And I actually thought, 'Well, big boy, you've fucked up now'. What do you do when you can't write? I'd been in that place for ten days... I had everything I wanted as long as I stayed in the room. The magazine was going to press. Oh God. It's a weird story. One of the great journalism stories of all time."

It is a great story, and Thompson wants to tell it. Thompson and Ralph Steadman had been to the Kentucky Derby on behalf of *Scanlan's Monthly*. Steadman had finished the illustrations and the magazine was ready to go to print – the presses were being held – waiting only for ▶

SUGARLOAF KEY, Fla. — The TV is out tonight. The set went black about halfway through Miami Vice, just as Don Johnson dropped a KGB thug with a single 200-yard shot from his high-tech belly gun.

The storm got serious after that, and the mood in The Keys turned mean. Junk cars crashed in the mango swamps and fishheads whipped on each other with sharkhooks in all-night bars and roadhouses along Highway ATA. These people will tolerate almost anything except being cut off in the middle of Miami Vice.

On nights like these it is better not to answer the telephone. It can only mean trouble: Some friend has been crushed on the highway by a falling power pole, or it might be the Coast Guard calling to say that your boat was stolen by dope fiends who just called on the radio to say they are sinking somewhere off Sand Key and they've given you as their local credit reference, to pay for the rescue operation.

In my case, it was a just-reported shipwreck involving total strangers. An 88-foot tramp motor-sailor called "The Tampa Bay Queen" had gone on the reef in Hawk Channel, and all hands had abandoned ship.

There were only three of them, as it turned out. They had all washed ashore on an ice chest, raving incoherently about green sharks and coral heads and their ship breaking up like a matchbox while they screamed for help on a dead radio.

"Why not?" I thought. We are, after all, in The Business – and besides, I had never covered a shipwreck, not even a small one... and there was also talk about "losing the cargo" and the cruel imperatives of "salvage rights".

None of this talk seemed worth going out in a storm to investigate at the time, but that is not how The Business works. I went out,

and not long after midnight I found myself huddled with these people in a local motel where they'd been given shelter for the night ... and by dawn I was so deep in the story that I'd hired a 36-foot Cigarette boat to take me and the Captain out to his doomed wreck, at first light, so he could recover whatever was left of it.

"We'll have to move quick," he said, "before the cannibals get there. They'll strip her naked by noon."

The sun came up hot and bright that morning. The storm was over and the chop in the channel was down to 3 feet, which means nothing to a fast Cigarette boat. We were running 40 mph by the time we got out of the bay, and about 40 minutes later we were tying up to the wreck of The Tampa Bay Queen. It was lying on the bottom, tilted over at a 45-degree angle, and the sea had already broken it open.

There was no hope of saving anything except the new nylon sails and the V-8 engine and six nickel-plated brass winches, which the distraught captain said were worth \$5,000 each – and maybe the 80-foot teakwood mast, which would fetch about \$100 a foot in Key West, and looked like a thing of beauty.

We climbed up the steep rotted deck and the captain set about slashing down the sails with a butcher knife and ordering the first mate to take a hatchet to the winches. "Never mind a screwdriver," he shouted. "Just rip 'em out by the stumps."

The first mate was in no mood to take orders. He had not been paid in three weeks, he said, and he was wearing fancy black leather pilot's

boots with elevator heels and slick leather soles, which caused him to constantly lose his footing and go sliding down the deck. We would hear him scream as he went off, and then there would be a splash. I spent most of my time pulling him back up the deck, and finally we lashed him to the mast with a steel safety cable, which allowed him to tend to his work.

By this time I had worked up a serious sweat, and the mystique of this filthy shipwreck had long since worn off. The captain was clearly a swine and the first mate was a middle-aged bellboy from New Jersey and the ship was probably stolen ... But here I was out on the high sea with these people, doing manual labour in the morning and bleeding from every knuckle. It was time, I felt, for a beer.

I was moving crabwise along the deck, homing in on the cooler we'd left in the Cigarette boat, when I saw the scavengers coming in. They had been circling the wreck for a while, two half-naked thugs in a small skiff, and the captain had recognised them instantly.

"God help us now," he muttered. "Here they come. These are the ones I was worried about." He looked nervously out at the two burly brutes in the cannibal boat, and he said he could see in their eyes that they were getting ready to board us and claim the whole wreck for themselves.

"It won't be much longer," he said. "These bastards are worse than pirates. We may have to fight for it."

I shrugged and moved off toward the beer cooler, at the other end of the wreck. The captain was obviously crazy, and I had lost

my feel for The Story. All I wanted was a cold can of beer.

By the time I got to the Cigarette boat, however, the thugs had made their move and were tying up alongside us, grinning like wolves as they crouched between me and the cooler. I stared down at them and swore never again to answer my phone after midnight.

"Was this your boat?" one of them asked. "We heard you whimpering all night on the radio. It was a shame."

The next few minutes were tense, and by the end of that time I had two new partners and my own marine salvage business. The terms of the deal were not complex, and the spirit was deeply humane.

The captain refused to cooperate at first, screeching hoarsely from the other end of the wreck that he had silent partners in Tampa who would soon come back and kill all of us...

But you hear a lot of talk like that in The Keys, so we ignored him and drank all the beer and hammered out a three-way agreement that would give the captain until sundown to take anything he wanted, and after that the wreck would be ours.

It was the Law of the Sea, they said. Civilization ends at the waterline. Beyond that, we all enter the food chain, and not always right at the top.

The captain seemed to understand, and so did I. He would be lucky to get back to the shore with anything at all, and I had come close to getting my throat slit.

It was almost dark when we dropped him off on the dock, where he quickly sold out to a Cuban for \$5,000 in cash. Mother ocean had prevailed once again, and I was now in the marine salvage business. ●

©Hunter Thompson 1988. From *Generation of Swine*

THE GONZO SALVAGE CO.

BY HUNTER S THOMPSON

thompson

Thompson's copy. He hadn't written a word.

"They kept sending a copy boy every fucking hour. They had to change them, I got very vicious with some of them. But they kept coming. And so finally... I took this long bath, drinking whisky out of a bottle and this kind of thing... and I knew that I'd failed. It's like the tree falling in the forest – there's no sound until someone hears it. I'd let down everybody. The copy boy, I could hear him beating on the fucking door... I knew the little bastard was there."

Someone – Thompson or his editor – decided to use raw notes.

"I think it may have been his idea. I think it was mine. It was his idea to accept them... My only problem was they might not fit into the telecopier..."

"I thought it was a massive error. Even when it came out, I thought, Oh fuck. I dreaded seeing it. It was the notes, almost straight through..."

Thompson orders another drink. "Gonzo is now in the Random House Dictionary. It's a legitimate English word... That was the beginning of it. It was born out of total failure. Yeah, I was ready to quit again. I have a long history of wanting to quit journalism, of trying to..."

"Every Sunday night," suggests Hobson.

And what keeps you going?

"Well, er, it's er..."

"Overdrawn notices," says Hobson, "from the bank."

"Yeah – I never had any of those fucking things until I started making all this money..."

"There's only one person in the world," says Hunter Thompson, "I've ever thought about envying. I've thought about it. It's Jacques Cousteau."

Jean Cocteau?

"Jacques Cousteau. Yeah. I've given it a lot of thought."

Tell me.

"He stood the sonofabitch on its tail – a 747 – and we went straight up, for I don't know how long... and the drink, I didn't have to hold it. It never spilled a drop."

"I figured if I could do whatever I wanted... I still think I could do Jacques Cousteau's job... Let's have a drink. Mine's a whisky."

Steadman told me you were an 'intelligent redneck'.

"Hah. No, hillbilly."

What's the difference?

"Altitude... Rednecks are at sea level."

Could you recommend all this?

"I've been running such a fast and crazy ride. Yeah, I could recommend it. I figure they could bottle it up and have it as a tour... My last four decades, or five, whatever it is, and for some extremely high-tech Frankensteinlike experiment you could bottle it. Maybe not sell it, but drop it on people... I dunno, you could either sell it or use it as a punishment."

Who'd buy it?

"Well, people who didn't really understand, I think. Amateurs... It's all kinda been either fun or intolerable madness... Or maybe both, maybe that's the trick. Maybe intolerable madness could pass for fun."

How much fun are you having these days?

"Not enough. Not much. No, not really. I assume you're asking in the context of being a bestselling writer. Nothing's really changed. Well, every book I've written, every one, has been on the bestseller list for some time. Not as high as this, and not quite as strange. Yeah."

Where is your best writing?

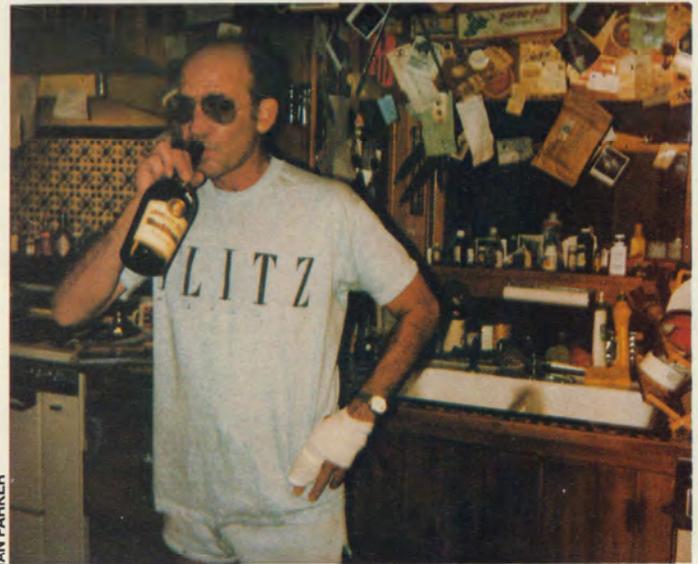
"It comes down to pages – very short flashes... I'm basically a gambler, backroom journalism. I'm not always right. I'm right as much as almost anyone else writing about politics. More, I think. It's just, when I'm

wrong, I really am wrong... When I pay attention I like to think I'm more accurate than anybody. I almost have to be. It's a very high level. I have a lot to overcome, for credibility."

What do you have to overcome?

"Well, this horrible reputation for sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, whisky, guns, madness, death, bets, you name it. It's very unlikely that a person, any one person, could be universally seen as the craziest person in the world, and still be considered to be a wise man of politics – a seer of some kind... I have to be fairly right. I could be torn to pieces. I could be beaten stupid. They'd love to see my brain had finally turned to – hah! – mush."

Now I've caught flu. The poor man's Gonzo, it keeps me weird and sweating in my hotel room, cutting feverishly between thirty-five channels on the hotel cable, watching ads for things which kill bad breath in dogs. Yellowstone National Park is on fire, and the smoke blows over Aspen. Dazed, I make an effort to wander the town, and visit the tiny offices of the Aspen Daily News. The day's headline is GUINEA PIG IN CUSTODY AFTER NIPPING STUDENT (as if in competition with the World



IAN PARKER

Weekly News: IS TAMMY BAKKER'S POOCH POSSESSED? – 'Divine Lap Dog Runs In Circles And Has A Weird Look In Eyes'). With a certain cutesy charm, the Aspen Daily News divides itself into three editorial sections. Letters, Local and "Real World". Thompson is not in the real world.

A young, friendly preppy journalist explains the Hunter situation.

"He is seen as one of the principle bulwarks against the influx of 'greedheads', as he calls them... Right now, there is a real split between the old community and the new crowd. I think people tend to regard Hunter as a little crazy, but in a benign way... A few people think he's full of shit – a drunken drug-abuser."

Why isn't he in jail?

"Good question. Ask the sheriff. One of his best friends, actually, is the sheriff – Bob Braudis."

Thompson has told me he believes in karma. "I try extremely hard not to violate those laws... If you're an evil bastard in this world, you come back as a rat."

According to Braudis's secretary, sitting under a framed Dostoevsky quotation, the sheriff is "in retreat". So too the Chief of Police. I never find out if it's karma alone which protects the Good Doctor.

On my last day, Thompson rings the hotel and suggests breakfast in a bar near the airport. Once there, two hours late, he threatens to kill me with a golf club. My death flashes before me, and then he almost apologises.

"Hah," he smiles. "I'm only half-serious."

Thompson is in an ugly mood because, the previous night, a TV was taken from his house. He has been "violated" – for the first time in twenty years.

While we're in the bar, the culprit – Thompson's carpenter – leaves a message. According to the barman who takes the call, the confessor was weeping with fear – "close to breakdown".

thompson

"Fuck," says Thompson. "I had people going out to break fingers. I'd called all the fences and junkies to see who's stealing. I had the sheriff out to squeeze people... to get the freaks, you know, to round up the usual suspects."

The carpenter will not be forgiven.

"That's the last thing he'll do in *this* valley. He'll not work anymore. He stole a TV set from me. Fuck him. If I can be stolen from, they'll come back again. He's gotta learn some morals."

He's a brave man.

"He's a fucking bastard of a goddammed shitty drunken coke-fiend son of a carpenter."

I change the subject, with talk of the famous unpublished novels. *Rum*



Diary, he says, is finished.

It could appear?

"Oh, it will. It will. It's finished from page 1 to 470 or something. I'm saving it. It's my insurance for when I, hah, run into a party of schoolchildren on that mortorcycle and set them all on fire when it explodes."

And the other novel?

"*Prince Jellyfish*. As a matter of fact, it was sitting right in front of you. If luck had been on your side you could have been – instead of cooking with the microwave – you could have been reading *Prince Jellyfish*, which is really special."

It's finished?

"Yeah. It's not finished like *Rum Diary's* finished. *Prince Jellyfish* needs about... two weeks of work.

What will you be doing in five years' time?

"Smoking cigarettes."

Are you happier now than ten years ago?

"'Bout the same. It seems like one long year, really – since twenty-two. It seems like a long year. I have a very odd sense of time. Which gets in my way sometimes."

What's the most important thing in your life?

"Where d'you get these questions? *Whisky*. What else d'you need?"

Have you written a will?

"Yeah. Don't worry, I've got it under control."

Are there politicians you'd like to see more often?

"Bobby Kennedy. George McGovern is the best... There are good people in politics. McGovern is the best I've ever known. I thought Nixon was the worst until I saw Bush. Bush is sort of like Nixon without the guts, without the spine – Nixon without *meaning*."

Does Bush know who you are?

"You bet he does. No, Bush may not know *himself* – I'm sure he doesn't

know anything himself, except what time the cocktails come down, and to remember to send a card to his wife on Mothers' Day... His *people* know me. His people are very good. That's what's starting to scare me – they're very good."

After me, Thompson is going to see the (Democratic) Governor of Colorado, with whom, like Gary Hart and McGovern, he is on good terms.

Are people surprised to discover you're a party man?

"I don't know. My intention is to be effective. Politics, to me, is the art of controlling your environment. And if you don't, somebody else

"I've been running such a fast and crazy ride. Yeah, I could recommend it. I figure they could bottle it up and have it as a tour... You could either sell it or use it as a punishment."

will. That's why I'm going to see the Governor. That's why, if I can, I will help elect Dukakis. That's the point [*waving his still-incomplete column*] of this thing. But Dukakis's staff. They're fucking up, and it endangers me, y'know. I live here too."

A waitress comes up.

"I've read most of your books, I read *Fear and Loathing In Las Vegas* when I was in college. It was a *real* mind-opening experience."

"Oh God. What'd you do after that?"

"Took a little acid."

"That's what I was afraid of..."

She wanders off.

"Goddamn. I wonder. I worry about the effects."

Earlier, the name Ivan Boesky had cropped up. "He's my hero!" Thompson had screamed. There are others? I ask. "Willie Sutton. Famous bank robber."

Outlaw?

"Yeah. He's the guy, when they asked him why he robbed banks he said, hah, "Cos that's where the money is'. A great bank robber."

You're still interested in crime.

"Interested, shit. That's all I'm involved in. Politics is crime... one of my major points of pride in my long career as a journalist and, er, participant, and the kind of journalism stories that I do, is that I've dealt from start to finish with criminals and I'm not sure if I ever got one busted. And that runs from, you know, politicians to Hell's Angels to the President of Peru to editors. I've never got anyone busted or whacked because of what I wrote about them. It's a high art, too – not working both sides – but it's a high art to be trusted, really, when you write about people. It's a great tribute..."

In, say, fifty years, how will you be represented in literary guide books?

"Hah. If I'm not there, they're going to be missing a large aspect of it aren't they? I'm not sure I'll be revered, no. But if they miss, ha, my very few books... Do you think it could be an honest account of the century without it? Leave it out, and what d'you put in? John Cheever? *Updike*? I'd like to see the person who would take a look at my stuff and say, 'This is not representative. We don't *need* this.' Yeah, maybe robbing future generations of real history..."

The waitress walks up. She has a sad job. Knowing Thompson's reputation, the manager has asked her to make a request.

"If you leave," she mumbles, holding an apologetic polystyrene cup, "and you want to take your cocktail, take it in one of these. *Please*."

"Well, I don't know." Thompson holds up his full glass beaker. "Shit... Goddamn!"

He has to go. He collects up his dry-cleaned combat trousers, his unfinished column, the "death-list" of suspected TV thieves, his golf club, cigarettes – and the full glass. He looks at me: "If you were in a foreign country..." He stops and smiles. "You *are* in a foreign country! – I was going to say you'd be killed."